

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

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Greetings! We are starting to build a program of relativity. I am getting feed-back on the first draft of the book, *Relatively Speaking*; We have had three meetings of the Students For Education with about 10 at each meeting and about 7 attending 2 of the three meetings; And, this is about the fourth newsletter in the last 6 months.

Just for fun, here are three excerpts (minor editing) from last year's end-of-semester "Response Forms." I think they reflect the usefulness of the relative perspective.

"I find it [relativity] very interesting and challenging because it contradicts a lot of what I've been taught in my life, yet it makes sense."

"I believe that, when first hearing about the relative perspective, I had an absolute view of the world. I now hope that I am on my way to developing a relative view of the world. This mode of perception and thinking is very helpful to me in my work and in my relationships with other people. Thank you."

"The relative perspective has helped me understand how to respond to my child in a more productive and helpful way."

Philosophy: Drive-by Shootings and Relativity

Consider that we are all concerned about the apparent rise in senseless violence and self-destructive behavior. Drive-by shootings, drug-addicted youths committing violent crimes to support their habits, disgruntled employees killing their co-workers before killing themselves, and spouses taking preemptive strikes to kill their mates before their mates kill them. What is the problem and what can we do about it? A beginning point is to contrast absolute and relative approaches to the issue.

Before getting to the specific arguments, we can note a basic difference between the two approaches. While the absolutists tend to rely on absolute values that are unchanging, the relativists tend to emphasize the necessity for developing new skills in order to adapt to a constantly changing environment.

A common absolute response to our current problem of social violence is to begin by asserting that "things are getting worse." Building on this contention that "things are getting worse," the absolutists can then argue that we should return to what we were doing before--when "things were better." Calling upon their belief in absolute moral values, the problem can be characterized as a break down in our commitment to those values. And, they can assert, there is a time-honored absolute answer: A re-dedication to (a) the absolute moral values by people of good conscience and (b) severe punishment for those who insist on choosing evil over good.

Specifically, the absolutists can encourage our schools to give a higher priority to teaching children "right" from "wrong." We can also support tax measures to build more prisons to house the wrong-doers. Also, we can focus our attention on the role of government. Government can expand its control over our educational system in order to insure that our schools are accountable for having "good" teachers that are teaching the "right" values.

Government can also direct the public focus on the need to spend more money for building more prisons in order to enforce a program of tougher law enforcement such as "three strikes and you are out." To restate, the absolute answer to our problem of social violence is through more education on teaching what is "right" and more punishment for those who do "wrong."

A common relative response to our current problem of social violence is to first reject the contention that "things are getting worse." The rejection can be made on the grounds that it is unknowable whether or not "things are getting worse." To jump ahead for a moment, if we reject the contention that "things are getting worse," then by extension we can reject the suggestion of returning to the values of the past as the values of a time when "things were better." The belief that "things are getting worse" can be seen as critical to the absolutists' proposal for returning to the values of the past. A couple of examples can serve to illustrate the problem of ever asserting that "things are getting worse."

First, let us look at a scenario between the teenager, the car, and pregnancy. Even if we acknowledge that teen pregnancy is on the increase, we can still maintain the position that this does not necessarily mean that "things are getting worse." We can point out that today's teenagers are more likely to own a car and that owning a car increases the teenagers' access to privacy. We can suggest that pregnancy related activities are frequently initiated in the back seats of cars. Rather than "things getting worse," the problem is that teenagers have not learned how to manage the increased freedom and privacy afforded by the car. (The "car" is just a symbol for change; we could have cited the working mom, the single parent, or sex programs on television.) For all we know, "things may be getting better" in that today's youth may be doing better than yesterday's youth would be doing if given today's challenges. The point is that, since our environment is always changing, there is no way to know if "things are getting better" or if "things are getting worse."

For a second example, let us look at a scenario between the wife, economic freedom, and divorce. In the past, wives had less opportunity for financial independence. Today, the wife does not have the same financial restraints and consequently has more freedom to speak out on a much more equal footing. Even if we agree that the divorce rate is increasing, we may not argue that "things are getting worse." It may be that different roles and expectations are now required of both partners that were not required in the past. As with the previous example, there is no reason to assume that returning to past values will improve anything.

After rejecting the assertion that "things are getting worse" and rejecting the recommendation for returning to the values of the past, what are the relative alternatives?

We can begin with the question: How does our environment today differ from that of past generations? Said another way, what skills are needed for our survival as a society today that were not as essential for past generations?

Here is a hypothesis: It is the skill of managing freedom.

Over the past 20 years, we can observe a world-wide decrease in the use of punishment as a means of some people controlling the behavior of other people. Authoritarian governments ruling by force are now being show cased as out-of-step and headed for evolutionary extinction. At a more personal level, many states have laws prohibiting parents from spanking their children. Consider that society has reduced authoritarian control over an individual's behavior, but individuals have not yet learned to manage this new freedom and the "senseless" violence we observe is the result.

Given the above hypothesis, it is clear that returning to old values and tougher law enforcement will aggravate rather than ameliorate the problem.

Specific prescriptions require specific examples. As for the two examples just cited relating to sex and divorce, the relativists could suggest (a) more sex research and education to prepare youth to deal with today's increased sexual freedom and exposure, (b) more discussion of alternative roles for spouses that are consistent with the greater freedom resulting from the increased financial independence of females, and (c) more encouragement for discourse regarding the benefits of having a society based on social contracts designed to maximize individual freedom in contrast to a society maintained by punitively enforced absolute values.

As for the role of government in a relative society, it is very limited. More prisons may help to protect society from those who would be violent. However, when it comes to the task of learning to be free, government can neither impose it nor punish a person for non-compliance. Only the individual, as an individual, can embrace freedom and choose to learn to manage his/her freedom with integrity. Consider that "managing freedom" is the challenge for the 21st Century.

Address Check:

Help me update the mailing list. If your address does not have a "**94" or "**95" on it, and you would like to continue receiving the newsletter, confirm your address and interest by either: (a) Sending a note to: School of Communication, PO BOX 1211, ARCADIA, CA 91077; or simply leaving a message on my answering machine anytime except: 8:00-9:00 A.M. on Tuesday or Thursday; and 5:00-6:00 P.M. on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. The number is (818) 585-7498. [PCC contact number does not apply after 1998.]

When I verify your name and address, I will put a "**95" on your label. Work with me on this. Occasionally, a call will be erased before I hear it—something to do with PCC's automatic erasing of "old" messages. If the "**94" or "**95" does not appear on your label even though you called in, please call again.

Relativist of the Month: Louis Rukeyser of "Wall Street Week"

Relativity is the philosophy of individualism and financial freedom is a significant ingredient for managing individual freedom. Every Friday on "Wall Street Week" (8:30 P.M. on PBS), Louis Rukeyser invites some the nation's most outstanding money managers to share their thoughts with his viewing audience. The theme is always the same: ways in which the individual can increase his/her personal financial freedom.

Meetings: We have had 3 meetings. We will continue to try different days and times to accommodate those who choose to participate. For now, we are 4 of 4 going to meet on the third Sunday of each month at PCC between 2:00 and 3:30. Topics of discussion have become whatever those present choose to raise. My efforts at increasing educational opportunity at PCC will continue, but these meetings will be for anyone choosing to be exposed to the relative perspective on whatever issue is raised by those present. If you would like to participate, it would be helpful to me (I tend to bring refreshments) if you would leave a message on my answering service (818-585-7498)--however, calling is not necessary and feel free to come if you decide at the last minute. [PCC contact number does not apply after 1998.]

Relativist's Quote of the Month:

"A thought is often original, though you have uttered it a hundred times."

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice

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**T A L K B A C K**

From Joni in Sunland, CA

*Your point about the yard work, housework and general organization gave me "food for thought." I sometimes get too caught up in the well-ordered and predictable and could work more on enjoying the "moment in time."*

From Paul in Arcadia, CA

*The Relativity and Banana Bread story reminds me again how important it is to look at the "big picture"--how everything relates to each other, rather than focusing on what is "right or wrong" or "true or false." After two terms at Art Center, I find the model of relativity applies to art and design as well.*

From Patricia in Pasadena, CA

*Hi there! Just a note to let you know that both address and name are correct. Thanks for the newsletter. I enjoyed reading it and I'm looking forward to the next one.*